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SUBJECT: NEW PARLIAMENT OPENS - GET READY TO RUMBLE

Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASON 1.4 (B AND D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Malaysia's new Parliament opened April 29 with a significantly increased opposition presence following the March 8 election. The Ambassador attended the official opening, which featured the King reading the speech prepared by Prime Minister Abdullah's government focused on domestic rice bowl issues. Parliament's first working session on April 30, telecast for the first 30 minutes, immediately deteriorated into pandemonium with ruling coalition and opposition members generously trading insults, jeers, and name-calling. Opposition MPs, emboldened by their March 8 gains and inspired by de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, have told us they intend to prove themselves to the public and aggressively challenge the government side at every turn. We anticipate the rough give-and-take will continue. End Summary.

King's Reads Address to New Parliament

¶2. (SBU) The Twelfth Malaysian Parliament Session, the first following the March general election, began on April 29, one day after the 222 Members of Parliament (MP) took their oath of office before the newly elected Speaker, Pandikar Amin Mulia. The Ambassador, along with other heads of diplomatic missions, attended the April 29 ceremony. Per tradition, the King officially opened the session with a speech, written by the Prime Minister's office. The address focused primarily on domestic rice bowl issues, and covered four broad themes: domestic economic development, needed reforms, national security, and briefly Malaysia's international standing. The speech highlighted Prime Minister Badawi's proposed judicial reforms and restructuring of the Anticorruption Agency to make it more independent. After praising the Royal Malaysian Police, the king noted there was room to improve its effectiveness. The King also praised the role played by the newly created Border Regiment and the two-year old Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency in combating smuggling, piracy, and illegal immigration. The speech concluded with comments on Malaysia's leadership as outgoing chair of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), citing specifically Malaysia's efforts to elevate the image of Islam and counteract the negative perception alluded to it "by certain parties."

A Day of Firsts for Parliament

¶3. (U) The new parliamentary session contains several

"firsts" in Malaysia's history. The ruling National Front (BN) coalition, although it retained the majority seats, lost its two-thirds majority in the March election. This means that BN can continue to pass parliamentary bills, but will need opposition support to amend the Constitution. The new Speaker of Parliament and two Deputy Speakers are from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Previously, the Speakers were always from peninsular Malaysia. The 82 MPs from the opposition coalition People's Alliance (PA) unanimously elected Wan Azizah, President of the People's Justice Party (PKR) and wife of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the first woman opposition leader. The Ministry of Information also announced daily 30-minute live telecasts of parliament, never before instituted. The opposition urged the government to telecast the entire session live.

"Bigfoot" versus "Big Monkey"

14. (SBU) April 30 represented the first working day for parliament, which will continue in session through May 27. Poloff witnessed the rambunctious April 30 morning session. Nearly all of the 222 MPs, including the Prime Minister and his Cabinet, were present. Pandemonium broke out within minutes after the session began. Opposition MPs were quick to flex their new muscles, trading insults, jeers, and name-calling with BN parliamentarians. A favorite opposition taunt was to remind BN of the "political tsunami" generated by the March 8 election results. Shouting matches started over such issues as why the opposition was allocated only three out of the top ten initial questions submitted to the Prime Minister and his Cabinet and why the first question was not reserved for the opposition leader, whose question was listed as third. During one fiery exchange, Democratic

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Action Party (DAP) Chairman Karpol Singh called a BN MP a "Bigfoot" with the BN MP retaliating by calling Karpol a "big monkey." MPs were generous with invitations for the other side to "shut up." The hostilities peaked when an UMNO MP called on Karpol, who is wheelchair bound, to show respect to the Speaker of Parliament when speaking to him by standing.

Rookie Speaker Fumbles, Opposition Pounces

15. (SBU) Speaker of Parliament Pandikar tried to restore calm and order, but his inexperience showed and he fumbled a procedural call early. After Prime Minister Abdullah answered the first question tendered, Pandikar refused to allow the traditional supplementary questions by MPs. This prompted former opposition leader Lim Kit Siang to respond. He called the Speaker's action "unprecedented, a mockery of parliament and a conspiracy to silence the 82 members of the opposition." The chaotic scenes occurred during the allocated time for live broadcasts, but sources tell us the broadcast was delayed. One BN MP told poloffs he thought the opposition MPs were taking advantage of the telecast to promote themselves. Information Minister Shabery Cheek told the press that if the opposition continues to turn parliament into a "circus", the Ministry would reconsider its live broadcast. Only three of more than thirty-five questions were addressed before the 90 minute question and answer session ended.

Comment - Let's Get Ready to Rumble

16. (C) This clearly is not the Parliament Malaysians have known in the past. The ruling National Front coalition and Prime Minister Abdullah's leading United Malays National Organization (UMNO) have never had to face such a large opposition presence in Parliament. Opposition MPs, emboldened by their March 8 gains and inspired by de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, have told us they intend to

prove themselves to the public and aggressively challenge the government side at every turn, embarrassing BN and UMNO whenever possible. Live television broadcasts of Parliament in action represent a good step for democracy, but we are not sure the government will continue this measure given the rough give-and-take that will be shown.

KEITH